

Draft

MAGICAL THINKING AND THE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
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Thank you, Janie, for reading that ‘true’ story. It was funny but there’s a sad truth in that story. My paranoid response was due to the medication. It is common after extended surgery and it soon passed. Psychology says that such beliefs are magical thinking caused by imbalances in the brain chemistry. However, there are many people who are caught up in such paranoid beliefs, who believe that voices are speaking to them, or who are absolutely convinced that there are hidden forces planning bad things. We see them every day on park benches, buses or wandering on sidewalks.

What is a good definition of magical thinking? One definition is this, **“magical thinking is characterized by the belief that thinking or wishing something can cause it to occur or be avoided.”** A professional psychological definition says this, **“1. The conviction of the individual that his or her thoughts, words, and actions, may in some manner cause or prevent outcomes in a way that defies the normal laws of cause and effect.”**

My reactions after the surgery at the hospital suggest that I was hoping to convince Janine that there was an evil conspiracy that needed to be uncovered and exposed to the world. That conviction would seem to fall under the category of magical thinking.

I bring this topic up because magical thinking and religion seem on the surface to be deeply intertwined. Intercessory prayer is one example. People pray to a Deity for some particular outcome in life. One might send a prayer asking for help with a relative who is desperately ill. Or someone could do a petitioner prayer asking for help with a life crisis or opportunity.

I am not suggesting that such prayers or other examples are right or wrong, valid or invalid. They are ways to understand and make sense of life. So are tarot readings, astrology charts, communion, chanting, and so on. They are focusing tools. Karen Armstrong in *The Case for God* speaks of them as rituals that give us entry into an experience of the sacred.

What does magical thinking have to do with us as 21st century religious liberals? After all, our Unitarian forebears in the early 20th century argued that religious humanism needed to lay aside such magical thinking. Our Six Sources includes this one: **“Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us**

against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” This source arises from the First Humanist Manifesto published in 1933 and in particular the Fifth assertion of that document: **“Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values...Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method.”**

However, I also remember the horrified looks on the faces of people at the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley where I began my Unitarian Universalist life in 1984 when people my age started to ask about the role of spirituality in church life. The general response was ‘We don’t talk about God here’ assuming the word Spirit equaled the word God. I didn’t believe in a creator God, either, but many of us saw spirituality as something apart from a God in heaven.

I propose to you this morning that the use of scientific method in religion isn’t sufficient to fully appreciate the mystery of existence. The use of rationalism is an important part of religious life but needs a sense of awe as well.

We might well sit here and say, **“Alex, we don’t speak in tongues, we probably don’t pray very much to a judging God, nor do we indulge in conspiracy theories that the bad people are out to take over the world.”** That’s a reasonable response. Is it true that we are immune to magical thinking?

A New York Times article from several years ago reminds us that we are surrounded by an ocean of magical thinking every day. The author writes that, **“magical thinking underlies a vast, often unseen universe of small rituals that accompany people through every waking hour of a day.”**

How many of us have spoken to our computers as though they were alive? Are there any of us who don’t walk under ladders or who in a moment of profound frustration say “God damn it” even though we are agnostic or atheist? Are there any here who occasionally cross our fingers? How many of us wear a lucky piece of clothing for that job interview?

We probably all occasionally engage in magical thinking. However, Unitarian Universalists tend not to do church hoping to overturn the laws of cause and effect. We don’t do prayers here in the same ways as our more traditional neighbors at the Mormon, Lutheran or United Methodist churches. We do “meditations of shared compassion” but also knowing it’s Ok to pray, too. We do not have a Unitarian Universalist version of the Rapture for the righteous and fiery lakes of lava for everyone else.

In short, we’re pretty rational in religious life. However, as I mentioned earlier, I don’t think that’s enough.

Is there an alternative to what we might dismiss as “magical thinking” in religious life for us? And might that alternative to magical thinking be common ground between those who support humanist rationality in religious life and those, for example, who are grounded in Wiccan ritual that carries so much powerful symbolism.

One possible answer is “magical feeling.” One definition is in Christine Wicker’s book “Not In Kansas Any More”, **“When I feel magical, I feel like I’ve tapped into my inner mystique, my inner priestess, and I feel sparkly! It is the feeling of being invincible! In other words, there isn’t anything I can’t do.”**

I feel more comfortable with an alternative meaning that’s not so sparkly or invincible. Here’s one working definition for magical feeling; ‘an **intuitive awareness and feeling of the world around us that cannot be analyzed easily.**’

Let’s stop for a moment to reflect on that expression “magical feeling.” Have you ever had such an experience? Might it have been when seeing a newborn child or the feeling that all was right with the world because of a special someone or event in our life?

Our religious humanist identity might well say those feelings are due to changes in our brain chemistry or elevated moods due to dopamine levels. Again, while that’s reasonable, I don’t think that’s sufficient for religious experience.

We might feel uncomfortable with the term ‘**magical feeling**’ so let’s substitute the term “**intuitive feeling**’ for it.

Curtis Reese was one of the original signers of the first Humanist Manifesto and was a pioneer in religious humanism. A number of years before he died, he was asked if he and the other authors of the Humanist Manifesto felt there might have been mistakes or anything to add. He thought about it and said that he and other signers felt that there should have been an assertion that human intuition was an essential and vital part of religious humanism.

If intuition is an important addition to reason in religious life, then how do we allow magical feeling or intuitive awareness be part of our faith?

One way would be ritual. Carl Jung argued in his later psychological works that intuitive feeling was as important as reason. He notes in “Psychology and Religion: West and East” that rituals within religion went beyond rationality to a state of connection with the unconscious desire for wholeness.

One of our most important rituals here at UUFC is our chalice lighting ceremony. We take care to light the chalice after the welcome and

announcements and the ingathering song. Why? Well, it's a ritual that says we create a sacred space with no more worldly church business.

This beautiful ritual of lighting a chalice has so many powerful themes. The flame signifies light, hope, wisdom, compassion, truth-seeking, and a willingness to walk through the darkness of ignorance. The bowl is a reminder of the container that can be filled with spiritual nourishment, and can be refilled as many times as necessary. The lighting of the chalice is an active ritual and not a passive one where we are told to live an ancient revelation. We LIGHT the flame because it is our work to show the way, and to make the world a better place to live.

There's more to it, however. When we light the chalice every week, we recite words. I am always amazed that your children know the words by heart. **Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.**

If we really feel those words and that ritual at a visceral level, we are tapping into an essential part of our unconscious faith in wholeness. It is a faith that is particularly liberal and future-seeing rather than clinging to the past. Those words can be so powerfully intuitive for us that we resist it when we think someone suggests changing any of them. They have become incarnation words to remind us of our ministry in the world.

I want to return to my own bout of magical thinking from all those years ago in the reading this morning. I recovered from the effects of that surgery and my delusions. I didn't harbor ideas of conspiracy nor did I believe minds were being assimilated.

However, I believe I had an experience a couple months later of magical feeling. I had been bedbound for about a month and finally figured out how to get myself out of the hospital bed into a wheelchair. I then was able to push myself in the wheelchair out the doorway onto a lawn. The home where I was staying had trees and fresh growing things all over and it was probably late February or March. I remember wheeling myself outside and it seemed to take ages. I found a spot on the lawn and locked the wheels so I could sit and listen to the trees and wind. Quite suddenly the seemingly eternal clouds of Seattle area parted and the sun shone all around me. I closed my eyes and felt the warmth touch my skin, sooth my aches and nourish my very soul. I was transported into a moment of magical feeling...a place of awe and wordless appreciation.

The only words I have ever found that do justice to that moment of healing come from a poem by Mary Oliver. Poetry and other forms of art, after all, are expressions of magical or intuitive feeling. This particular poem

called "The Ponds" speaks to magical wonder and imagination. She writes about the lilies that crowd a pond and notices their imperfections. Then she writes this ending:

**"Still, what I want in my life
is to be willing
to be dazzled --
to cast aside the weight of facts**

**and maybe even
to float a little
above this difficult world.
I want to believe I am looking**

**into the white fire of a great mystery.
I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing --
that the light is everything -- that it is more than the sum
of each flawed blossom rising and fading. And I do."**

Do you?

Thank you.